

THINKERS

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A wealth of knowledge

To that end, Mr. Antik was a driving force behind something known as Searching for Solutions Inc., a Naples-based nonprofit organization that will host the Imagine Solutions Conference 2010 in February at the Philharmonic Center for the Arts. It is expected that some 600 "exceptional leaders," mostly drawn from Southwest Florida, will hear and interact with great thinkers who are experts in critical areas facing society today.

As anyone who has met him can attest, Mr. Antik does not think small. He and his organization intend to make the conference an annual event.

And if this all sounds a bit high-falutin and improbable for such a somnolent area, then maybe you don't know as much you think you do about Southwest Florida (which Mr. Antik defines as an area running — north to south — from Sanibel to Fort Myers to Bonita Springs to Naples to Marco Island).

Within this tightly confined area, more than 200 retired CEOs of Fortune 500 companies live, at least for part of the year. These are people of high accomplishment and skills, men and women who have spent their lives solving problems and running large organizations. They are generally well educated, well informed and, if Mr. Antik is correct, itching to make positive contributions to the greater good.

The concept is not new, although it is shockingly out of character for Florida, and indeed for the eastern United States as a whole. Among the most vigorous and best known of such places are the Milken Institute and TED (which stands for Technology, Entertainment, Design), both in California, and Colorado's Aspen Institute, the granddaddy of them all.

Mr. Antik has been an enthusiastic attendee at events at Milken, TED and Aspen. He also has invested a great deal of donated time to nonprofits like Outward Bound and hospital boards.

When he and his wife arrived in Naples three years ago, he began to toy with idea of establishing a center for learning and thought in his new hometown. He was struck immediately by the wealth and breadth of talent here — and also by the fact that much of this talent was underutilized.

"I started having conversations at night with other people we met," he says. "This is an easy area to meet people. I had been going to TED for 17 years; I had been going to Aspen for 16 years. I would come back from those, and I would be incredibly pumped up. When you come back, you're full of ideas, you're full of conversations you've had with interesting, significant people who are doing things. That motivates you if you're still in the thinking, doing part of life."

Redefining retirement

Mr. Antik, who before his retirement had forged a successful career with private equity firms and also had founded his own marketing and consulting operation, figured he wanted something more than a sedentary retirement removed from the active pursuit of ideas and intellectual engagement.

Searching for Solutions sprang from a luncheon Mr. Antik had with Tom Everist, head of a successful South Dakota manufacturing company who lives seasonally in Naples. When Mr. Antik laid out his vision for a learning center for Southwest Florida, Mr. Everist encouraged him to pursue the idea and offered financial support to get it going.

Soon Mr. Antik discovered other enthu-



siastic and prominent supporters, such as David Lucas, chairman of the board for the Bonita Bay Group, and Myra Daniels, the driving force behind the Philharmonic Center and countless other projects in Naples.

"Now we had a core group," Mr. Antik recalls. "I had meetings at all the major thought leader conferences. I made 50 calls to top thought leaders, and I said I will fly up and treat you to lunch or dinner and listen to you talk about current issues of the day. It was amazing. They all took my call."

Soon he was meeting with and learning from influential thinkers like David McCullough, the historian and author; John Seely Brown, the noted scientist; and Anna Deavere Smith, the playwright and actress who was a recipient of a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship (known as the "genius grant").

In 2008, Searching for Solutions was incorporated and plans for the 2010 conference were under way. Mr. Antik serves as chief experience officer and also is vice chairman of the Southwest Florida board of directors. Mr. Everist chairs the board.

To date, more than 30 speakers have committed to the conference,

including experts like Amory Lovins, the author and scientist who is one of the world's leading experts on renewable energy and energy efficiency; Susan Eisenhower, chairman emeritus of the Eisenhower Foundation; David Walker, formerly Comptroller General of the United States



Walker



Eisenhower

and head of the Government Accounting Office who now is CEO of The Peter G. Peterson Foundation; and Tony Robbins, the motivational guru who also serves on Searching for Solutions' national advisory board.

Organizers hope to have 40 speakers on board by February, and they expect the final list to include at least one Nobel laureate.

No political agenda

One of the early ground rules governing the conference and the organization was that neither entity would conform to or espouse a political agenda.

"Our environment from day one was to be as nonpartisan as possible," Mr. Antik says. "We said from the beginning that we are not going to have politicians on stage. We've had offers from very significant politicians who would like to be on stage. We said no. We said you are welcome to come, to pay, to be in the audience. We think that's fine."

Mr. Antik says expenses leading up to the conference and including the conference itself will be "north of \$1 million." Searching for Solutions receives donations from individuals, groups and other sponsors.

Attending Imagine Solutions Conference 2010 will not be cheap. Discounted registration, which requires a \$500 deposit before Sept. 30, is \$2,250. Regular registration is \$2,500.

Speakers will receive no fees, although all expenses — including lodging at a Ritz-Carlton — will be provided.

Mr. Antik and Lynne Groth, executive director of Searching for Solutions, expect it will take about three years for the final shape of the organization to emerge.



Groth

the thinkers

>> **Searching for Solutions**
Board of Directors

>> **Tom Everist, chairman**
President, The Everist Company

>> **Randy Antik, vice chair**
Chief Experience Officer, SFSI

>> **Steve Myers, treasurer**
CIO emeritus
South Dakota Investment Council

>> **Carson Beadle**
Chairman, Executive Committee
Security Mutual Life Insurance Co. of New York

>> **Wilson Bradshaw**
President, FGCU

>> **Kellie Burns-Garvey**
Anchor, NBC-2

>> **Joe Catti**
President and CEO
Finemark National Bank and Trust

>> **Joe Cox**
Senior Partner, Cox & Nici

>> **John Fumagalli**
President, Northern Trust

>> **Todd Gates**
Chairman, GATES

>> **David Lucas**
Chairman, Bonita Bay Group

>> **Patrick Neale**
President, Lucera Inc.

>> **Dolly Roberts**
Owner, DBR Marketing

>> **Sandra Stilwell**
CEO and owner, Stilwell Enterprises

While the annual in-season conference will always be a focal point, Ms. Groth says ongoing programs that take place over the entire year will be equally important. "If you can get (conference attendees) to come back for a smaller symposium, where you invite a smaller group of people who really want to roll up their sleeves and do more of a workshop, well, that's where it becomes very meaningful," she says.

She also points out that not everyone who attends will be retired.

"We are reaching out to business leaders," she says. "We need (the involvement of) young leaders, as well. We are looking for proven, seasoned problem solvers."

Mr. Antik says Searching for Solutions, which now has six staff members, will not evolve into a "think tank" in the traditional sense.

"We're never going to be a place that has on staff the ability to write white papers or do major research," he says. "We're more of a 'doing' organization."

The conference will have a global perspective, a national focus and a local orientation, he says, adding taking the brainpower that exists in Southwest Florida and matching it with today's best thinkers is an example of "intelligent networking with a purpose."

Ms. Groth cautions that those who attend should not expect a passive experience, and they should also be prepared to have preconceived ideas and notions challenged with considerable vigor.

"I expect to see some people squirming in their seats," she says. "If we make things a tad uncomfortable (for those in the audience), then we've done our job."

More information about the conference and Searching for Solutions is available at www.ImagineSolutionsConference.com. ■